

Into the Maw of the Cult



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We drove up to the campus. There was a small parking lot between us and the gymnasium, where the debate would be held. "Looks like we have competition from a football game," I said to Charlie.

Yellow buses were pulling into the lot, spilling passengers into a large crowd of people milling around on the grass. We turned in behind a bus, and I hit the brakes. Now we were close enough to see the unsmiling faces. Charlie began to whisper an Act of Contrition.

Everyone was dressed in Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes. "I don't think they're here for football," said Charlie, his spiritual repair-work done.

"And I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto," I said. "What's going on? The debate isn't for two and a half hours. Where have all these people come from?"

They were coming from all over Southern California, expecting to see their hero, a minister for Iglesia ni Cristo ("Church of Christ" in Tagalog), rhetorically smash a Catholic apologist. I was to be the smashee.

We parked the van and walked to the gymnasium. Iglesia men in three-piece suits were speaking into walkie-talkies. Several women were setting up a reception table outside the foyer. Others were checking off names on long lists. At the side door trucks filled with folding chairs were being unloaded. Farther back, people were taking video equipment out of a van. And behind us more yellow buses were pulling into the lot, disgorging passengers, and moving on.

We walked inside, stepped over cables, dodged men carrying chairs. Against the wall opposite the foyer was the raised platform: lecterns, tables, microphones, and, off to the left, an overhead projector and large screen. Video cameras were being set up in a semicircle in front of the platform.

Technicians hovered around them, armed with bandoliers of battery packs.

The bleachers had been extended on both sides of the gymnasium. The floor was being filled rapidly with folding chairs, some of which already had been claimed. Several dozen impeccably dressed Iglesia members wore badges identifying themselves as ushers. They greeted people at the doors and took them to seats that seemed to be assigned.

The mood of the audience was distressingly expectant, perhaps not unlike the mood of audiences at a Roman arena. These people were looking for blood--mine.

After we set up a book table (we ended up selling almost nothing since Iglesia people are discouraged from reading anything but their own church's literature), I started to look for my opponent, Jose Ventilacion, the minister from the National City Church of Christ.

His church is visible from the freeway and gets plenty of stares--and with good reason. Iglesia churches are reminiscent of Mormon temples. They feature many pinnacled towers (none with a trumpet-blowing angel Moroni on top). Some people say the architecture reminds them of the Emerald City in the *Wizard of Oz*. In the Philippines it is said the Iglesia churches are built not so much with an eye to aesthetics, but with an eye to necessity.

At the rapture, or so the story goes, Iglesia members will be whooshed into heaven, but only if they're inside one of their churches when the rapture comes. The church building too will be taken up. Thus the need for the aerodynamic design. The story may be apocryphal, but I wouldn't dismiss it out of hand. These people believe strange things, and they believe them sincerely--more than sincerely, fanatically. Their fanaticism is not to be taken lightly.

When I sat down at my place on the platform, an Iglesia man took a chair a few feet away, near the stairs. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm your bodyguard," he said. "At our debates in the Philippines, people often charge the platform, and I'm here to protect you in case that happens."

I was not comforted. What good would one bodyguard be against 3,500 people trained to hate Catholicism?

Before I go on I should give a little background about this strange sect. Its founder was Felix Manalo. Baptized a Catholic, he fell away from the Church as a teenager. Later he was influenced by Protestant missionaries who had come to the Philippines. He also must have been influenced by Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, since his church's distinctive doctrines seem taken from those religions.

In 1914 Manalo incorporated Iglesia ni Cristo in the Philippines. Within a few years he was teaching that the Christian Church had apostatized in the first century and had ceased to exist. Eighteen and a half centuries later, God instructed Manalo to effect a restoration. (Sounds like Joseph Smith, eh?) Today's head of Iglesia ni Cristo is Manalo's son, Erano.

The church publishes a monthly magazine called *God's Message*, the most notable feature of which is its strident and low-brow anti-Catholicism. It is also anti-Protestant. The Catholic and Protestant churches, but especially the former, are tools of Satan, say the writers. Each issue has many more pages devoted to debunking Christian churches than to explaining Iglesia's own positions. In a way that's understandable: Iglesia ni Cristo has few positions to explain. Keep in mind that this is a sect built not so much on a set of doctrines, but on a set of anti-doctrines. The members are told what to shun; there isn't much for them to accept in the positive sense.

Unlike Fundamentalism, unlike even Mormonism and the Jehovah's Witnesses, Iglesia ni Cristo is a true cult. If you had seen the Iglesia people in the audience, if you had seen how they reacted in lock-step to their leaders, you could imagine how they might all take up in unison cups filled with adulterated Kool-Aid. At least that's the impression I got, from my vantage point on the platform.

The gymnasium was preternaturally hot. An hour before the start of the debate the people seated on the folding chairs were fanning themselves. At the top of the bleachers it was hotter still. And on the platform, under the klieg lights, it was hellish. (I went through a quart of water before the night was over.) I wondered if someone had turned on the heaters in the afternoon, in order to get the audience on edge. I wouldn't doubt it: The Iglesia folks are sneaky.

Jose Ventilacion and I had negotiated terms of the debate over a period of several months. Each time a change was made in the format, he had to check with the authorities in Manila. I had been warned by people who had seen Iglesia debates not to trust Ventilacion. I pooh-poohed the warnings, but I was wrong. The terms of the debate were broken even before Charlie and I arrived at the gymnasium.

Ventilacion and I had agreed this would be *mano-a-mano*, just the two of us. I was seated alone at my table, but he had three helpers at his. Their job was to pass him notes and books to read from while he was at the lectern. Sometimes they did more than that. Andy Suarez, himself a minister, was unable to control himself during my remarks. He repeatedly stood up and shouted at me.

"I'm not debating you," I shouted back. "I'm debating him. Sit down!"

The overhead projector also wasn't part of the agreement. It was placed on Ventilacion's side of the platform, with two more of his people manning it. When I first saw it and realized that Suarez and others would be acting as seconds, I complained to Ventilacion. He flashed a toothy smile. "If you don't agree to this format, we'll cancel the debate and we'll give our people an instruction." By that he meant he'd just preach to them.

I didn't have much choice. The listeners were mainly former Catholics bamboozled by Iglesia ni Cristo's anti-Catholic rhetoric. They *needed* to hear what the Catholic Church really stood for--and what *their* church really stood for and how it came to be.

Besides, six against one looked good: The odds were in my favor. I was bound to get a certain amount of sympathy, especially if I explained the situation--which I did. But Ventilacion, in the question period following my opening remarks, said I misrepresented the facts, that I had "agreed" to the format.

"When a man has a gun at his head and 'agrees' to hand over his money," I replied, "that's not a real agreement." Ventilacion said I shouldn't worry about technicalities, but it was clear *his* people had spent *lots* of time worrying about technicalities. You don't produce a well-orchestrated (well-railroaded?) debate by ignoring the little things.

But however meticulous it may be organizationally, Iglesia ni Cristo is remarkably cavalier when it comes to "the little things" of theology. Its positions are just *stated*, never really *substantiated*. Its arguments are puerile.

For instance, believers in the claims of Felix Manalo say Revelation's references to an "angel" coming out of the "East" or from "afar" refer to a "messenger" ("angel" is taken from the Greek for "messenger") coming from the "Far East." And what is the geographic center of the Far East? Why, the Philippines, of course. Therefore, Felix Manalo was a true prophet: (1) He claimed to be a prophet, which means (2) that he claimed to be God's messenger, and (3) he came from the Far East.

How to respond to such a claim? I started by listing the countries that make up the Far East: China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Indochinese countries, and, yes, the Philippines. "If you look at a map of the Far East," I said, "you'll see that the Philippines is in the lower right-hand corner. The geographic center is in southern China, *not* in the Philippines." There were laughs from the Catholics and Protestants (a few hundred of them were in the audience), nervous fidgeting from the Iglesia people.

Later on, after having dealt with the main charges against the Catholic Church, I zeroed in on Manalo himself. Iglesia ni Cristo tells its members little about their founder: What I said brought a strange silence to the gymnasium. I explained Manalo's early years and how, as it is now said, he began his church in 1914 after receiving a revelation from God and being informed that he was the new prophet.

"Why, five years later, in 1919, did Manalo come to the U.S. to study with Protestants? Why would he study with 'apostates'? Why would a prophet need to study religion at all, after having talked with God?"

Then I gave the answer: "Because Felix Manalo didn't start off claiming to be a prophet. Originally Iglesia ni Cristo was just another Protestant sect, one that borrowed heavily from the American Cambellites. It wasn't until 1920, when there was a schism within Iglesia ni Cristo, that Manalo started to say he was a prophet. He said that because he wanted the members of his fledgling church to take his side, not the schismatics' side.

"Manalo *never* was a prophet, just a slick con man. Even today the leaders of your church deceive you. They not only lie about the Catholic and Protestant

churches, they lie about the origins of your own church. They don't want you to know the truth."

Iglesia Ni Cristo's anti-Catholicism is not very inventive--that, or the attention span of Iglesia people is remarkably short. *God's Message* brings up the same charges again and again, yet there's no indication that devoted readers tire of hearing the same thing, even in the same words. Two, three, even four times a year there will be feature stories decrying the same Catholic belief or practice. I don't mean stories that mention a topic briefly and then move on. I mean stories that are almost word-for-word identical.

One of the favorite topics is the identity of the beast of Revelation, the symbolic number of which is 666. Most reputable scholars, Catholic and Protestant, say the number refers to the Roman Emperor Nero. Not all agree, but no such scholars say the beast is the papacy. But that's exactly what Iglesia ni Cristo says.

In itself that's not surprising. After all, countless Fundamentalists say the same thing. But Iglesia ni Cristo, in *God's Message*, says it in a most peculiar way: It makes a bold argument which any attentive reader can disprove simply by glancing at *God's Message* itself.

The argument goes like this: "The number 666 is the sum of the letters of the beast's title. The Pope's title is *Vicarius Filii Dei* (Vicar of the Son of God). [Actually, it's not. His title is *Vicarius Christi* (Vicar of Christ).] We know this is the papal title because it appears prominently on the tiara of the popes; the letters are formed out of hundreds of jewels. *Vicarius Filii Dei* tallies to 666, which means the papacy is the beast." End of proof.

The editors of *God's Message* must think the magazine's readers are dolts. They print as part of the article a line drawing of the tiara with the words *Vicarius Filii Dei* lettered in, just so you know where they appear. Then--and this shows real chutzpah--they print a photograph of Pope Paul VI, the last pope to wear the tiara. Of course, in the photograph there's no hint of any lettering on the tiara. The photograph contradicts both the text and the line drawing, but no one seemed aware of that until I pointed it out during the debate.

Ventilacion did the only proper thing. He ignored my point and changed the subject. He had a wonderful way of doing this. My favorite example concerns

the translation of scriptural passages which supposedly included the name of his sect. This is a major issue with Iglesia members. They believe the Bible mentions their church by name. They desperately want to find the phrase "Church of Christ" in the sacred text.

Their argument is facile: "What is the name of Christ's church, as given in the Bible? It is the 'Church of Christ.' Our church is called the 'Church of Christ.' Therefore, ours is the church Christ founded."

Not many people will be impressed with such an argument--when it was first presented to me during a question and answer period some years ago, I had trouble not laughing aloud--but the folks at the debate thought it made a lot of sense. The problem was that the verse Ventilacion was citing didn't contain the phrase "Church of Christ." I read to him the Greek and said, "It means 'Church of God,' not 'Church of Christ.'"

"That's your opinion," he said.

"No, it's not. That's what the Greek says."

"That's your opinion."

"If you want to know what a verse really means, you need to look at the Greek, because the text of the New Testament is in Greek."

"That's your opinion," he repeated, smiling broadly.

"No, it's not my opinion. It's a fact."

"That's your opinion."

Of all the debates I've been in, this was at once the most frightening and the most frustrating. It was the most frightening because Iglesia ni Cristo is a true cult, not a mere sect, and it was easy to see why bodyguards were *de rigueur*, even if their muscle wasn't needed this night. And the debate was the most frustrating because my opponent wouldn't adhere to elementary norms of civility and because the audience, at least the Iglesia portion of it, seemed impervious to even the simplest argument against its position.

Iglesia ni Cristo is a menace. Today it's a menace mainly to Filipino families,

but many of the ushers, I noticed, were not Filipino. Non-Filipino members were being "showcased" as ushers, proof that Iglesia no longer confines itself to one ethnic group.

This is an organization that is adapting itself to the American idiom. The American edition of *God's Message* used to be printed in a dual-language format: half Tagalog, half English. Now all the text is in English, the better to appeal to Americans of various backgrounds.

Iglesia ni Cristo makes Fundamentalists, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses look like slackers when it comes to commitment and anti-Catholicism. We can expect this cult to grow rapidly--mainly at the expense of our Church. And it will, unless we take a stand.

["Which is the True Church?" is a three-hour VHS video recording of this debate. The two-tape set is available from *This Rock* for \$65.00, which includes shipping and handling. Address orders to *This Rock*, P.O. Box 17181, San Diego, California 92117.]